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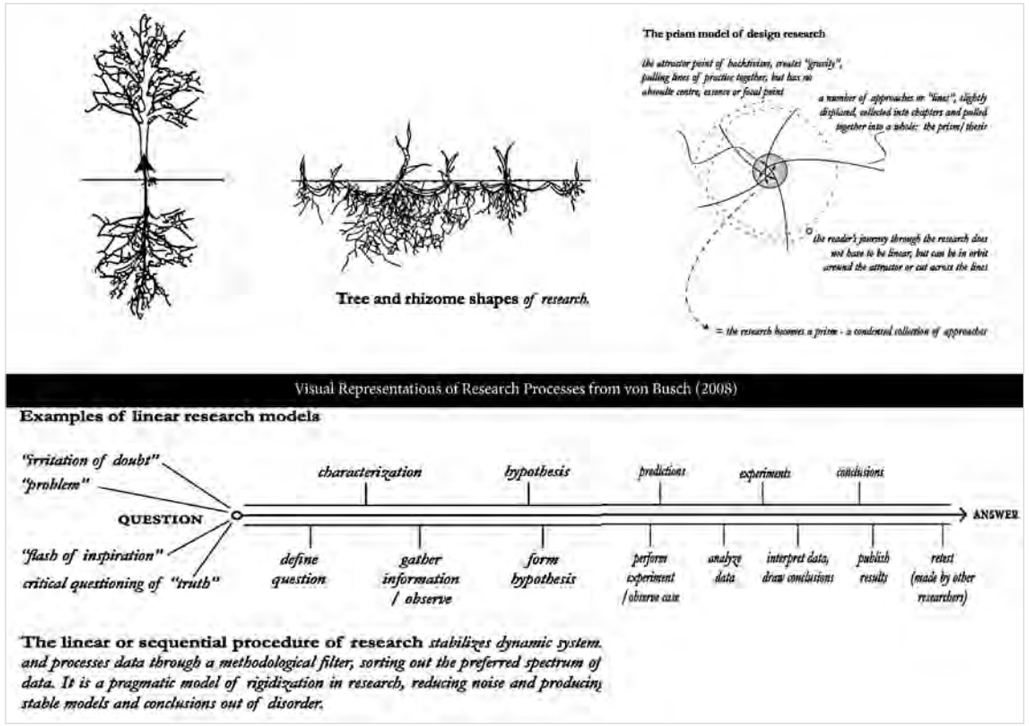
PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH

RESEARCH-LED PRACTICE | RECYCLING | FASHION RESEARCH DISCOURSE

ABSTRACT

NEGOTIATING THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN PRACTICE AND THEORY IS COMPLEX AS TIME CONSTRAINTS AND DEFINITIONS OF WHAT CONSTITUTES RESEARCH IMPACT UPON OUR ABILITY TO PRACTICE OUR CRAFT AND HOW THIS MAY BE VIEWED WITHIN AN ACADEMIC SETTING.

This paper will take the viewer on a journey of a design practice that was initially dismissed as a hobby but which later, came to define what it meant to be a sustainable fashion designer and educator. In particular it will explore the practice of recycling and how thoughts and theories derived from an academic setting have been translated into practical applications. These have included a number of outputs such as a collection made from recycled clothes, the establishment of a social enterprise and a series of workshops aimed at community development initiatives as a means of social inclusion. The paper will highlight the difficulties in holding down a full-time job in higher education (HE) and a design studio in the inner city, and the problems that arise with justifying and qualifying academic rigor and research methodologies. Transcending the space between formal and informal education, the research



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will demonstrate commonalities of practice as well as raise questions relating to the need for educators to practice what they preach, especially as it relates to design, manufacture and consumption practices. It will draw on approximately 20 years of both education and manufacturing practice and will provide a critique of specific academic contexts that have sought to belittle the practice and push it off course. At its root will be the contention, that to fully explore how fashion theory and practice may be changing within a contemporary setting there is a need for engagement with the realities of daily life and a rethinking of what constitutes fashion theory. Images of the authors design work and personal reflections will form the background to the discussion and will be contextualized within the lens of relevant academic theories and methodologies.

INTRODUCTION

This paper has been inspired by frustrations felt in trying to achieve a balance between teaching and research, particularly within the environment of HE fashion design programmes of learning and the issues faced in attempting to bring the concept of 'practice' into relevant teaching and research contexts. As such, this paper reflects upon methods of fostering an environment in which we are able to practice what we preach and investigates the multifaceted routes that lead to the attainment of higher knowledge in our subject areas. Implicit within this exploration is the hypothesis that the narrow confines of what constitutes 'academic research' can sometimes stymie and downgrade efforts and make the experience all the more onerous and complex. As a Senior Lecturer in Fashion Design and as someone who is called upon to supervise research activities at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, experience has shown the difficulties that can be encountered in converting fashion design activities into high-level research. The questions this paper hopes to address through reflection on specific case study material and discussion into research frameworks are: To what extent are textile and fashion based outputs still seen as just 'hobbies'? To what extent has there been a change in perceptions of fashion design research and practice?

WHAT CONSTITUTES RESEARCH?

It is now recognized that there are several methods of research that have resonance to us as design practitioners, the most relevant being practice-led/based/focused research, reflective practice, action research and grounded theory. These methods are gradually becoming subsumed within the academic research cannon and have led to interesting outputs and a reframing of what may constitute research particularly within a practice-based context. What is generally recognized though, is that practice becomes academic research when it is either embedded within a text, '… creative work might be converted to research by a suitable accompanying text' (Till et al.: 12) or through the development of an artifact, '…practice-led research should concentrate on how issues, concerns and interested can be examined and brought out by the production of an artifact' (Till et al. 2005: 14).

Within the realm of fashion, key publications have led to the embedding of fashion theory and practice within a deeper academic context and given rise to a wealth of investigation and deep thought (Kawamura 2005, Harvey 2008, von Busch 2008a, Bruzzi & Gibson 2013). In its abstract form, how fashion provides a link to forces of development and activism has been discussed (Wallace 2012, von Busch 2013) and how, as a production process, it feeds into notions of social equity and empowerment (Fletcher 2008, Curwen 2013, Park & Sarkar 2013). Much of these reflect on fashion as both an abstract form in terms of a change maker and as physical form – clothes and garments. We have also seen over the years a deeper contextualisation of both fashion theory and practice and a repositioning of fashion within the academic cannon. Von Busch (2008a: 20) terming his approach to clothing production as 'hacktivism' states that:

> *Hacking is a matter of dedicated and systematic curiosity of understanding a system, reverse engineering it, finding a suitable place for intervention, plugging in and keeping the power on. Hacking is to modify and advance a system because you love it, not because you hate it.*

To compliment this approach to research von Busch (2008b) advocated a non-linear approach to research, not necessarily having a beginning or end point but rather a point of attraction and something to draw elements of the knowledge building process together. This is illustrated in figure 1 where we see the development towards a more organic research process and one in which various points of interest may become more or less relevant.

TO FULLY EXPLORE HOW FASHION THEORY AND PRACTICE MAY BE CHANGING WITHIN A CONTEMPORARY SETTING THERE IS A NEED FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH THE REALITIES OF DAILY LIFE AND A RETHINKING OF WHAT CONSTITUTES FASHION THEORY.

Smith and Dean (2009) in their practice-led research study identified three keys types of practice: conceptual practice, dialectical practice and contextual practice. This classification of practice is useful to practitioners since it allows those engaged in this work to give form to thoughts (conceptual), to explore the unique human process of making that is felt, lived, reconstructed and reinterpreted (dialectical) and scope for thinking in a setting (contextual). The subsequent paragraph outlines the journey of a design practice as a way of showing how this may be conceived as 'research' and the value of the design and manufacturing processes in the attainment of 'new' knowledge, particularly as it relates to the practice of recycling. Practice together with theory has informed this enquiry and was carried out in order to make use of visual texts, issues, debates and desires that were local in focus but global in reach (Smith & Dean 2009).

JOURNEY OF A DESIGN PRACTICE

Methods of recycling clothes for commercial, environmental and social concerns have played a large role in my practice since the early 1990's. This practice was borne out of childhood passions but also from a politicisation of my beliefs as a result of education and travel. Throughout the 1990's I helped set up and run *NoLoGo*, an *Oxfam* initiative in both London and Leeds and this saw the conversion of donated and 'waste' items into saleable garments (figure 2).

A workroom set up with donated industrial equipment became a hive of activity for volunteers, keen to learn and improve their design and clothes manufacturing skills. A high street shop became a creative hub for the communication of both developmental and environmental messages. *NoLoGo* was great success with numerous benefits to a number of parties. *Oxfam* benefited from increased sales, a widening customer demographic and also added value to their resources, which at the time were being sold off

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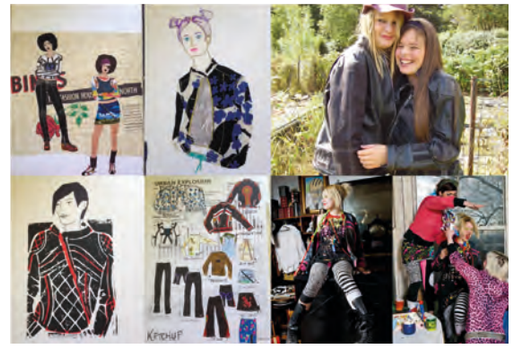

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to secondhand and vintage traders for a fraction of the market price. Volunteers benefited from valuable experience and the aesthetic showed that refashioned items could be trendy and relevant to the zeitgeist of the time.

Running *NoLoGo* at the same time as studying for a degree in Textile Design I reached a crux in my career, I was offered the opportunity to either continue *NoLoGo* as a fulltime job with *Oxfam* or undertake a PhD, with attached scholarship based on my undergraduate research into tailors in South India. The recognised 'academic' context of the PhD brought with it an increased validity to research endeavours, but to fully extend the research enquiry I wanted to develop practical solutions in order to test out my theories and position myself as a designer within an environmental and political context. This I attempted to do by fully embedding myself in the process of the design and manufacture of clothing made from recycled materials, by establishing a studio from which to work and drafting up plans for a social enterprise, in order to test out ideas of design activism and social inclusion. Space to undertake practice was and still is very much compromised within an academic setting, where it is recognised as a valuable space from which to work and generate ideas but sorely as a facility for staff use.

When I attempted to incorporate this design and manufacturing process within an academic position, within a red brick university I was informed that as a 'hobby' it could not be considered 'research'. Therefore, I was left with no other option than to relinquish my position and go it alone. For the subsequent 8 years I worked part-time in a number of HE institutions and forged ahead with *Ketchup Clothes* (figure 3), an initiative that took found and discarded clothing, made it new, engaged in fashion shows and photoshoots (figure 4), sold outputs to the public via shops and market stalls and conducted all manner of recycling workshops (Denis 2011b) (figure 5). Much of this was centred upon ideas developed under NoLoGo and seemed a logical route in understanding more about what it took to become a sustainably focused designer.

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Secondhand clothes stall, Zambia, 1996

Discarded clothes found on streets of Leeds 6, 2015

Image of cheap, fast fashion, 2015

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This enterprise continues to this day but has been through many peaks and troughs. For certain though, it has provided a vital focus for reflection on fashion and has been inspirational to teaching and research. The studio space fosters a loci for research endeavours from which more academic outputs can be created and hopefully have resonance to us as designers and makers, and ultimately our teaching. The insight and experience that comes from still making clothes validates me within the eyes of students and keeps me engaged in the subject (Dennis 2011a). It has also made reflection on academic discourse more relevant, as attempts are made to contextualise the study and practice of recycling, discussion surrounding which continues through this paper.

RECYCLING THOUGHTS AND THEORIES

Von Busch (2008a) encouraged us to hack into systems that are not quite working. McDonough and Braugart (2002) suggested that we need to design as if waste does not exist. Papanek (1976) highlighted that design should not just be about the elites and Schumacher (1978) proposed that our technology should be appropriate with small being beautiful. Fletcher (2008) advocates five ways to making the clothes on our backs more sustainable and Klein (2001) exposed the horrors behind the 'branded, globalized world'. These authors are just a few who have been inspirational in their quest to set a framework for sustainable fashion and design, which have informed subsequent research motivations, intentions and outcomes.

Personally, I want to explore if the fashion industry can be a force for good and if so what action is needed to turn this from rhetoric to reality? I love my sewing machine, I love being at it, I love the idea of it, yet I know for many around the globe it represents an instrument of oppression rather than pleasure and creativity. Research to date has shown how it is possible to draft up commonalities of practice with producers across the globe through the use of the sewing machine and pattern cutting techniques, and this can give insight into how producers may be assisted by development initiatives (Dennis 2011b, 2011c) (figure 6).

The fact that as an industry 'fashion' has been subjected to all manner of change all in the name of development draws us into theories concerned with aspects of activism, globalization and modernity. Key to the conversion of theory into practice thus needs to focus on how our fashion practice may have a detrimental or beneficial impact on the environment and human life (Dennis 2011c), key tenants of which are discussed below.

DESIGN ACTIVISM

The logic behind clothes recycling is to get a sustainable loop working, where waste is increasingly incorporated into manufacturing and consumption systems. However, this can be problematic, especially when distances between production and disposal are often far apart and preventing clothes from falling out of the loop can be difficult (figure 7).

Recycling is one way of entering this loop and for many is viewed as an activist activity (von Busch 2013 Fuad-Luke 2009, Julier 2013). It is often undertaken as an alternative to conventional modes of consuming new clothes and as a way of producing pieces that can be brought to the market place in new forms, thus prolonging the natural life of the original piece. (e.g. AntiForm, Good One, Junky Styling Redmuttha) At the root of this activism is often the desire to investigate anti-consumption approaches to clothing design, social enterprise and ways in which people are able to have without buying and make rather than consuming. This approach to design and production is often chosen over more conventional forms of make due to a concern with overconsump¬tion and a desire to tackle sustainability at a local level but for a global necessity (figure 8).

A conscious effort is often made to source found or discarded materials and to use local production through the establishment of design studios, equipped with appropriate machinery. This form of redirective practice appears consistent with notions of design activism and social entreprise, advocated by writers such as Julier (2013), Fry (2009), von Busch (2008a) and Fuad-Luke (2009, who see value in a reorientation of design practice and the embedding of design think¬ing as a way of solving wicked problems in this case landfill, air miles and unethical practices in global clothing production. For many it is done out of love for the industry and for the creative potential (and relatively low costs) that such design and production entails. Von Busch (2008a: 20), terming his approach to clothing production as 'hacktivism,' put this succinctly when he stated that:

> *Hacking is a matter of dedicated and systematic curiosity of understanding a system, reverse engineering it, finding a suitable place for intervention, plugging in and keeping the power on. Hacking is to modify and advance a system because you love it, not because you hate it.*

Initiating change appears at the root of many activist definitions. For example, Fuad-Luke (2009: 6) defined activism as '…taking actions to catalyse, encourage or bring about change, in order to elicit social, cultural and/or political transformations.' The change here being the way in which we consume, produce and design.

As a designer this has always been part of the process. As we adapt to innovations in textiles and modes of manufacture, we change the shape and form of things. We mix up references to give a 'new' take on things and present these to an ever-hungry public. This of course, in itself is not strictly activism since the catalyst for example, may be to encourage people to wear shorter skirts, in many cases the design change is not going to be significant to bring about deeper social, cultural and political change. This is because we are changing the outputs of our endeavour but not altering the underlying implicit system of production and consumption. To do this requires a radical change in our opinions and structures of design.

GLOBALISATION

Thoughts on globalisation by writers such as Ritzer (2005) and Bauman (2011) have provided a compelling discussion into ways of viewing fashion and made items. Citing two dependent but very distinct processes namely 'glocalisation' and 'grobalisation' in his publication *The Globalisation of Nothing*, Ritzer (2005) argues that these processes give way to the production of 'something' and 'nothing' respectively. The 'something' borne out of 'glocalisation' being '…generally indigenously conceived, controlled and comparatively **rich** in distinctive, substantive content' whereas the 'nothing' from 'grobalisation' was '…generally centrally conceived, controlled and comparatively **devoid** of distinctive substantive content' (Ritzer 2005:10). We all encounter the 'nothings' from globalisation, for example, the drinks container bought to hold our morning coffee only to be discarded 15 minutes later, the high street bought dress discarded after a few wears due to changes in body, identity or just to keep 'on trend'. They are the many products designed with inbuilt obsolescence in mind

shorting their life and condemning them on some distant scrap heap (BAN 2002). Writers such as Braungart and McDonough (2008) contend that waste needs to be eliminated from the design process and that more needs to be done to tackle issues to do with waste, particularly as they apply to clothing and its production and disposal (Fletcher 2008). Many interested in sustainability within the clothing industry advocate a 'closed loop approach' as the only way to address the vast environmental problems associated with inbuilt obsolescence (Reiley & DeLong 2011).

MODERNITY

Bauman (2005) proposed that to live in the world today is to exist within a state of liquidity in which nothing is permanent and our identity, in particular, is subject to extreme 'fluid' forces. In viewing clothing within this context he argued that:

> *…you must 'lose the ponchos' which were so much en vogue last year, since if you wear a poncho now, 'you look like a camel.' Donning pinstripe jackets and T-shirts is over, simply because 'nobody' wears them. And so it goes, if you don't wish to sink, keep surfing; and that means changing your wardrobe, your furnishings, your wallpapers, your look, your habits—in short, yourself—quickly, and as often as you can manage.*
>
> *(Bauman 2005: 56)*

This reflection on modern life proposed that we are now living in an age of 'liquid modernity'. In this context identity has moved from a fixed to a fluid state and old stereotypes have become, if not obsolete, then challenged. Artists and designers, seeing the body as a canvas, have distorted old preconceptions of gender, race and class and proposed alternative visual spectacles of the self (for examples see the work of artists such as Orlan, Sherman, Bowery, Wear, Shonibare). These visions can provide us with inspiration as fashion designers as we consider the extent to which clothing can distort the body and add to the debate over western versus nonwestern, traditional versus modern, hegemonic versus non-hegemonic dress (Shah 2014). These debates are relevant to the study of clothes made from recycled materials since the basis on which they are created would not exist if it were not for the effect of fashion on the perception of a garments quality, value, relevance and usefulness. The discarding of the old for the new has come at a price. The manufacture of fashionable items has generated mountains of waste, the export of which has displaced indigenous modes of manufacture and raised serious environmental concerns over the sustainability of such practices (Sinha et al. 2010), as stated by Pickup (2007: 2):

> *The detrimental effect of our lifestyles on our natural environment and the widening poverty gap across the globe is causing great consternation in mainstream society…we are beginning to assess with increasing concern the damage we are inflicting on our environment and the disastrous implications of our lifestyle choices for future generations.*

The purchase and use of second hand clothes has long been seen as a lifestyle choice in the western world and a signifier of beliefs centred upon thrift, make do and mend and a desire not to waste (Reily & de Long 2011). The sense of projecting a retro look is also of importance. Thus second hand clothes have provided the focus for a number of research projects and analysis has been made concerning their environmental benefits (Farrant et al. 2010, Dissanayake & Sinha 2012, their appropriation amongst younger consumers (Reiley & De Long 2011) and methods for reappropriating into current fashion systems (Song & van Dyke 2013) and the impact of their export on economies such as Africa (Sinha et al. 2012).

> *It was estimated that the purchase of 100 second-hand clothes would save between 60 and 85 new garments dependent of the place of reuse, The [Life Cycle Assessment] LCA showed that the collection, processing and transport of second hand clothing have significant impacts on the environment in comparison to the savings that are achieved by replacing virgin clothing. The reduction of impacts resulting from the collection of 100 used garments ranges from 14% decrease in global warming for the cotton T-shirt to 45% reduction of human toxicity for the polyester/ cotton trousers. The results of the study thus show that clothes reuse can significantly contribute to reducing the environmental burden of clothing.*
>
> *(Farrnat et al. 2010: 735)*

Similarly, studies concerned with the environmental impact of using second hand clothes have highlighted ways in which they have been used and in the process proposed models for the incorporation of second hand clothes into existing global fashion systems (Sinha et al. 2012, Song & van Dyke 2013). In the main, these have led to the conclusion that current rates of overconsumption are unsustainable and to seriously reincorporate waste materials back into the fashion system requires a restructuring of present manufacture and consumption practices.

RESEARCH-LED PRACTICE

Methods of taking on board this research discourse and the associated actions that are needed has meant that engagement with research are

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Response to the work of Yinka Shonibare, 2013

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been focused upon the application of theory to practice in order to generate critical design thinking. This process could be termed 'research-led practice'. As such the design practice has been embedded within an urban, inner city space as a way of reflecting upon processes of development and draws on the surrounding environment for its resources and inspiration. Since a lacuna exists within literature relating to knowledge concerning design processes and methods for making second hand clothes assessable within the mainstream and making them fashionable again, investigation into pattern cutting techniques and methods of production and consumption have formed the basis for research endeavours (Shah 2015). The overall aim is to assess the extent to which the reuse of second hand clothes can contribute to environmental, social and economic sustainability (Brown 2013). Stronger academic contextualisation has also been achieved through involvement in the *Global Denim Project* (Miller & Wooward 2011) (figure 9) and a discussion of my work as a response to Yinka Shonibare's work (figure 10). This has afforded the opportunity to present work within the context of different disciplines, namely sociological, political and art based contexts.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has discussed the difficulties of balancing identities as an educator, practitioner and researcher in sustainable fashion design and contributes to debate surrounding practice-led research. Value has been seen in the adoption of this approach, particularly where it uncovers real-life scenarios that may impact upon ways in which we teach, conduct research and ultimately position ourselves within the fashion design cannon. Discussion surrounding personal design journeys highlighted the difficulties encountered in contextualising practice within an academic context and also showed the progression of ideas and outputs. This outlined the transition from the practice of recycling being viewed in a derogatory manner to it being supported and valued. The HE environment has changed and methods for expressing and communicating fashion-based research outputs are now more common. However, there still appears to be difficulties in justifying and qualifying this approach in terms of academic rigor and research methodologies. Research frameworks may have moved on in terms of accepting and indeed encouraging practice-led research activities but it is still most common for research to involve the production of academic papers, book chapters etc. We may be able to submit an exhibition as a valid research output but if enquiry is centered around design, then where is the opportunity to submit a market stall as research output? Personally, I gain more information about how my work is perceived by the general public from engagement in 'selling' than I do from presenting in a gallery space. The impetus for my research is underpinned by notions of democratic design and not about making couture pieces, thus the desire to investigate recycled items comes from the sense of how they can become 'normal' rather than extraordinary. Miller (2010: 13) in his book *Stuff* put forward the proposition that '…the problem with viewing clothing as the surface that represents, or fails to represent, the inner core of true being is that we are then inclined to consider people who take clothes seriously as themselves superficial.' Thankfully there have been significant shifts in the way in which fashion has been viewed within an academic setting and its overall value as a relevant academic discourse but it appears we still have a way to go in it being fully accepted into the academy.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: Visual representation of research processes, von Busch 2008b.

Figure 2: Images of items made from recycled clothes and textiles, NoLoGo, Oxfam, 1993.

Figure 3: Early images of clothes made under the auspices of Ketchup (2004 - 2006). Images: Author's Own.

Figure 4: Fashion shows and Fashion Shoots (2008 - 2009). Images: Author's Own.

Figure 5: Spaces of make and consumption (2010). Images: Author's Own.

Figure 6: Commonalities of Practice. Photographs: Author's Own.

Figure 7: Discarded clothes on the streets of Leeds, UK (2015). Photographs: Author's own.

Figure 8: The Impetus for Design Activsim. Photographs: Author's Own.

Figure 9: Outputs developed under auspices of the Global Denim Project (Dennis 2011d). Photograph: Author's Own.

Figure 10: Work conducted as a response to Yinka Shonibare (Shah, 2013). Photograph: Author's Own.

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THE PROBLEMS WITH THE EXTENDED SLEEVE STYLES OF POST-WAR DRESS

EXTENDED SLEEVES | POST-WAR CLOTHING | PATTERN CUTTING | GUSSETS | FIT

ABSTRACT

THIS STUDY IDENTIFIES AND EXPLAINS FIT PROBLEMS FOR THE EXTENDED SLEEVE: A TERM USED THROUGHOUT THIS WORK TO RELATE TO A SLEEVE THAT IS CUT IN ONE, OR AS PART OF THE MAIN BODY OF A GARMENT.

Evidence of a lack of knowledge and experience in how extended sleeves should fit and perform has been accrued from a series of short commercial courses that identified and diagnosed fit issues, run at De Montfort University since 2007. The apparel professionals attending these courses were buyers, designers, pattern cutters and technologists. A commonality in their queries indicates a need to establish a clear set of expectations when looking to design, pattern cut and fit a garment with an extended sleeve.

The results of an investigation into contempor ary clothing and pattern shape provide a basic understanding of fit expectation for the loose fit extended sleeve in comparison to the cut and function of the set-in sleeve. 54 garments were examined during wear and a range of movements was carried out to identify problems with extended sleeves. The common areas for fit problems are supported through the analysis of Post-War women's clothing, where the inherent problems with this design are revealed. The methods of cutting for these vintage